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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001647

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SUBJECT: TURKMEN AND RUSSIAN PRESIDENTS INAUGURATE NEW SCHOOL

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¶1. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: On December 22, President of the Russian Federation Dmitriy Medvedev visited Ashgabat to hold bilateral talks with Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and to attend the opening ceremony for the new Turkmen-Russian school. The modern school, built for 800 students, cost \$20,790,000 (counting the equipment provided to the school, the figure is closer to \$22 million). The school is the only academic institution in Turkmenistan providing classes entirely in Russian. The Turkmen Government considers the school a symbol of friendly relations with Russia, but the school is also a symbol of Moscow's commitment to supporting Russians and Russian language abroad. END SUMMARY

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT ATTENDED SCHOOL OPENING IN ASHGABAT

¶3. (SBU) According to Russian state-owned television, on December 22 President of the Russian Federation Dmitriy Medvedev met with President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to negotiate a deal on natural gas and to attend the inauguration of a new building of the joint Turkmen-Russian secondary school named after Pushkin. The Turkmen press called the school a symbol of strong ties between the peoples of two friendly states, and at a Cabinet of Ministers session on December 19, President Berdimuhamedov underscored that Turkmenistan values its cooperation with Russia, especially in such an important area as education.

THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY

¶4. (SBU) Under former President Niyazov's rule, the role of Russian language diminished significantly. In the 1990s the number of schools instructing in the Russian language in Turkmenistan was reduced by two-thirds. In 2002 all of the remaining 49 Russian-Turkmen schools were transformed; the main language of instruction became Turkmen, leaving only one Russian language class in each of them. Also in 2002 Turkmen officials initiated an education system change that reduced secondary education from ten years to nine years. This change meant that the Turkmen schools no longer provided equivalent education to the Russian or international school systems. The Pushkin school became the only school in

Turkmenistan providing a complete 11-year program, after which students could continue their education in Russia.

15. (SBU) The Pushkin school was established in 2000 on the basis of agreements reached between then presidents Vladimir Putin and Saparmurat Niyazov. In January 2002, during working visit to Moscow, former president Niyazov signed an agreement providing the legal basis for the school's activity. According to the director of the school in 2007, the school's teachers are experienced local professionals, including former university professors. She also said that Russia supplies all study materials to the school. Turkmen Government support includes provision of land and utilities.

Factoring in the number of ethnic Russians in Turkmenistan, and the Russian-speaking and Turkmen population who want quality education for their children, the demand for places at the school is extremely high. The school was overcrowded and accommodated 515 students, instead of the planned 350, in the old building in Ashgabat's Khitrovka neighborhood.

#### 20+ MILLION DOLLAR SCHOOL

16. (SBU) As part of his inauguration speech in February 2007, Berdimuhamedov announced reforms of the education system and issued a decree re-introducing Russian language in all secondary schools. In May 2007, Berdimuhamedov and then Russian President Putin participated in a ceremony laying the foundation stone of the new Pushkin school building. Russia's gas giant Gazprom funded the \$20,790,000 construction as well as another \$2,000,000 to equip the school, intended for 800 students. The Turkish construction company Erku built the new school, now located in one of Ashgabat's elite districts on Garashsyzyk (Independence) Avenue.

17. (SBU) The new building is in the shape of a flying pigeon-a

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symbol of peace and friendship between Turkmenistan and Russia, according to Turkmen state press. The two three-story wings of the building include classrooms, science labs, and a medical center. The building's tail houses a pool, a gym equipped with modern fitness equipment, an indoor tennis court, an indoor soccer field, home economics classrooms with cooking and sewing equipment, and metal and wood workshops. The main section is eight-stories and houses the administrative offices, space for a science club, and vocational training studios for dance, choir, acting, and sewing.

18. (SBU) Several members of the diplomatic community, including the children of several Russian-speaking ambassadors, attend the school.

One ambassador, whose children attended school in Moscow last year, said instruction is not as good as schools in Russia's capital. Nevertheless, in his view, Pushkin school is the best school in Ashgabat. It is a public school, and therefore, includes classes such as Turkmen language and history as well as some Ruhnama, in the curriculum. Officially, there is no tuition (since it is a public school), but families of local students pay several thousands of dollars for admittance.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: By visiting Ashgabat to open the Russian school, Medvedev demonstrated Russia's commitment to supporting Russians and Russian language abroad. The numerous visits and conversations between Berdimuhamedov and Medvedev over the course of 2009, including three presidential meetings over the last three weeks, show Turkmenistan's improved relations with Moscow since the pipeline explosion earlier this year. However, Turkmenistan has opened up to many countries willing to invest, and a deal on gas, with its economic impact, is more significant for the overall tone of the relationship than the opening of a school. END COMMENT.

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